

The Zimmermann Telegram

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In 1917, as World War I dragged on in Europe, a neutralist President Wilson and a mostly apathetic American public wanted little to do with the European conflict. In fact, Wilson had just won reelection under the slogan, "He kept us out of war." However, one supremely significant event early in that year would change the attitude of the entire country toward the war in general and toward Germany in particular. That event was the publication of what came to be known as the Zimmermann Telegram, so named because its author was Arthur Zimmermann, imperial Germany's foreign minister. In it, Zimmermann secretly proposed to Mexico, then hostile to the United States, an alliance with Germany in which the Germans would provide Mexico with ample supplies that the Mexicans would be free to use to reconquer Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. He further suggested that the Mexican president invite Japan, nominally an Allied nation but of great strategic concern to the United States, to join the German-Mexican pact. Naturally, when the German attempt to bring the war to the territory of a neutral United States became known (and Zimmermann inexplicably acknowledged authorship), the American view of Germany was so altered that within five weeks that one message had accomplished what even the earlier German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare had not: the United States declared war.

Inside Germany there was a thorough investigation as to how the top secret, coded telegram came into the possession of the United States government. A translation of the report of that investigation follows (see p. 46). In it, the Germans concluded that their codes had not been broken and attributed the compromise to treason. In fact, they could not have been more wrong, because the truth was that the revelation

of the Zimmermann telegram was the greatest cryptologic triumph of the First World War.



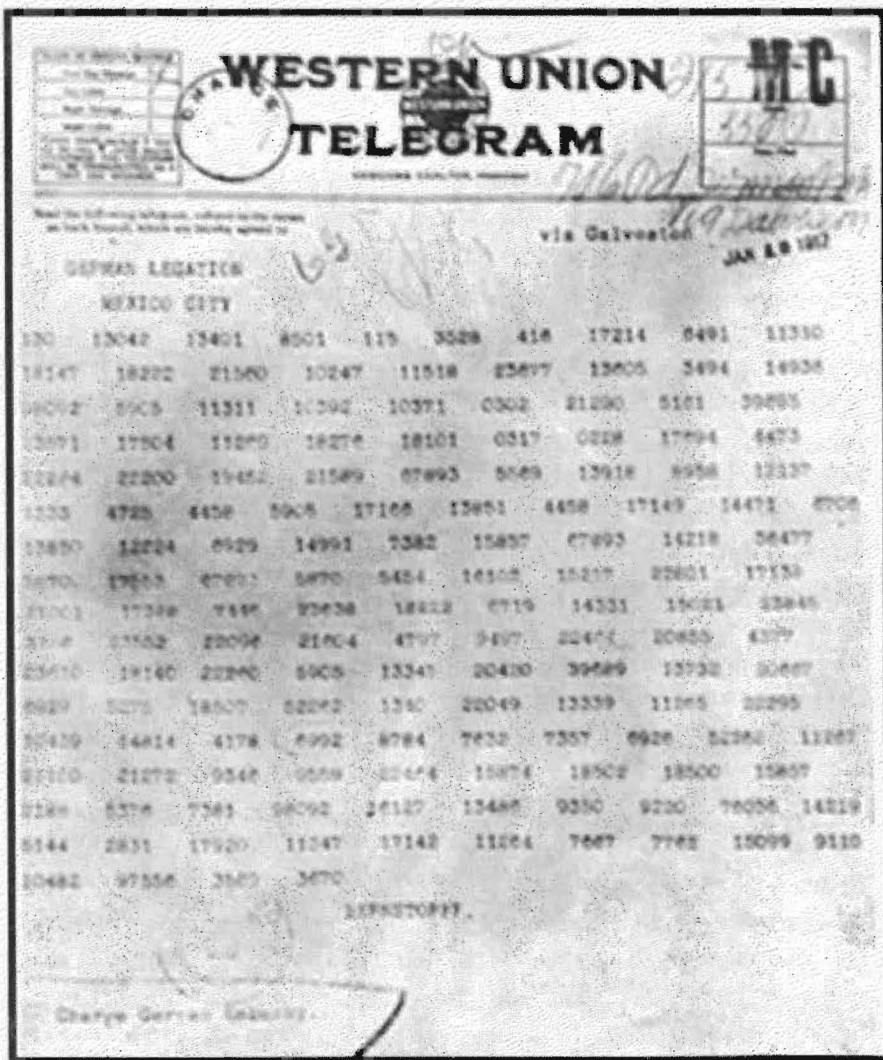
German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann

On the first day of the war, the British cut Germany's transatlantic telegraph cable, compelling the Germans to send all telegrams to the Western Hemisphere via neutral countries or via cables that actually passed through territory controlled by their enemies. At the same time, the British government accelerated the development of a cryptographic office whose purpose it would be to read enemy traffic. This organization came to be known as Room 40 because of its location in the Old Admiralty Buildings. Staffed with extremely capable people and aided by the fortuitous physical recovery by the Russians of the German naval codebooks in the Baltic Sea, it grew quickly in importance and capability. During the first two years of the war, Room 40 concentrated primarily on tactical naval traffic. However, once its successes had helped the British navy to bottle up the German fleet, it turned to the breaking of

German traffic of a more strategic value. On January 17, 1917, it was presented with its greatest opportunity of the war.

On that morning, Room 40 intercepted a coded German diplomatic message from Foreign Secretary Zimmermann to Count von Bernstorff, the German ambassador in Washington. It was able to do so in two ways. Because neutral but pro-German Sweden was transmitting messages for Germany, the British had tapped into the Swedish cable to South America where it passed by England. Zimmermann had sent one copy of his telegram by this route, with instructions that the German ambassador in Buenos Aires forward it to Washington. Room 40 got it. To ensure receipt, however, Zimmermann had sent it in a second and far more audacious way: he had the American ambassador in Berlin telegraph it to the State Department in Washington, which in turn hand-delivered it to the German embassy. This arrangement had been made possible by President Wilson, who was trying to mediate an end to the war and had offered to transmit German diplomatic messages to Washington when the Germans protested that they had no capability to communicate confidentially with their ambassador there. This copy traveled via Copenhagen, then London, on its way to the United States, with instructions to the German ambassador to forward it to Mexico. Room 40 got it when it passed through London.

enciphered using code 0075, which the British had already partially broken. With two copies at their disposal, they were able to piece together enough of the message to recognize substance of it. Admiral William Hall, Director of Naval Intelligence and head of Room 40, ordered that the existence of the telegram be kept secret from all other agencies while Room 40 cryptographers filled in the gaps in the message. The British used intercepts of other German traffic sent in code 0075 to recover additional codegroups, and by February 5 the task was sufficiently complete for Hall to share it with the British Foreign Office.



The Zimmermann Telegram (the Western Union copy forwarded by von Bernstorff to Eckhardt)

It was immediately clear that the telegram was of inestimable value in finally drawing the United States into the war on the Allied side, a long-time British objective. Still, there were problems to be solved before the message could be shared with the United States government. First, Room 40 was one of the British government's darkest secrets. Its existence as the source of the compromise had to be concealed from the Germans. Likewise, the British needed to conceal from the Americans that they had been reading American traffic, a touchy issue in that the United States was a neutral country. Third, the telegram still contained a few gaps that might lead the Americans to question its authenticity or actual meaning. Hall hit upon an ingenious idea that addressed all three issues. Using a contact in the Mexico City telegraph office, he was able to obtain a copy of the enciphered message that had been forwarded from the German embassy in Washington. This version had been sent using code 13040, since the embassy in Mexico did not hold code 0075. As an older and less sophisticated code, the British had recovered most of it and were able to read virtually the entire text, allowing them to fill in remaining gaps. In addition, as a forwarded message, the telegram had been given a new date and header information by the Washington embassy. Use of this version would allow the British to convince the Americans that the message was obtained in Mexico and lead the Germans to suspect the same. Room 40's role would therefore be concealed.

Because Germany had just declared unrestricted submarine warfare and the United States had broken off diplomatic relations as a result, Great Britain held the telegram for more than two weeks, hoping that it wouldn't be needed to prod the United States into war. However, when nothing happened, on February 22 the British delivered the Zimmermann note to American ambassador Walter Page, who greeted it with outrage. The British told him that they had no objection to its publication but requested that Great Britain not be revealed as the source. They used the

Mexican cover story, which Page accepted, to explain their acquisition of the telegram, thus hiding their reading of American message traffic. Page telegraphed President Wilson with the news on February 24, setting in motion a chain of events in the United States that completely altered the nation's perception of German war intentions.

As the British had requested, the United States government did not reveal the source of the telegram when it allowed the Associated Press to publish it three days later. In fact, a cover story was devised in which the United States claimed that it had obtained the telegram itself but could say no more out of concern for the lives of the persons involved. To support this story, the government retrieved from the Washington office of Western Union the coded original from Ambassador von Bernstorff to the German embassy in Mexico. This was sent to London where, using keys provided by Room 40, an official of the United States embassy deciphered the message. This allowed President Wilson to state truthfully that he had obtained the Zimmermann telegram and its deciphered version from his own people, thus blunting the argument of many pacifists that the message was a fake supplied by Great Britain or France to inflame American opinion. The story was widely accepted in Congress and the country, and war was declared little more than a month later. However, as is evident from the following translation of the official German report that erroneously pointed the finger at an unknown traitor, the critical roles of Room 40 and cryptology in bringing about this momentous event remained secret.

It is very probable that without the German foreign minister's message to the Mexicans, some other circumstance such as mounting American casualties and commercial losses as a result of unrestricted submarine warfare would have eventually drawn the United States into the war. There can be no doubt, however, that this inevitability was hastened greatly by the deciphering of the

Zimmermann Telegram, clearly the greatest cryptologic coup of the First World War.

[Investigation Report]

Berlin, April 4, 1917

The instructions for the Imperial envoy in Mexico, according to which he should suggest to the president of Mexico an alliance with Mexico and Japan after the possible outbreak of war with the United States, were enciphered with lottery code 0075 without the use of a secret key and attached as no. 158 to telegram no. 157 for the Imperial ambassador in Washington that dealt with submarine warfare and was marked top secret. At the opening of telegram no. 157 the date "January 16" was also enciphered; no. 158 contains no date. The coded text was delivered to the

American ambassador [in Berlin] with the request that he telegraph it to the State Department to be passed on to the Imperial embassy in Washington. To the inquiry of the ambassador regarding what the dispatch contained, he was told that it dealt with the Entente's response to President Wilson and contained instructions to [German ambassador to the United States] Count von Bernstorff for his personal information. The American ambassador received the dispatch from the Foreign Office on January 16 at 3 P.M. and forwarded it immediately via the American embassy in Copenhagen. By 7:50 it had already been transmitted by the main telegraph office there. The State Department delivered it to the Imperial embassy on January 19; it was immediately deciphered at the embassy. Telegram 158 was enciphered with code 13040 and telegraphed to the Imperial

English text:

Berlin, Jan. 19, 1917.

On February 1 we intend to begin submarine warfare without restriction. In spite of this it is our intention to endeavour to keep the United States neutral. If this attempt is not successful, we propose an alliance on the following basis with Mexico:

That we shall make war together and together make peace; we shall give general financial support, and it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer her lost territory of New Mexico, Texas and Arizona. The details are left to you for settlement.

You are instructed to inform the President of Mexico of the above in the greatest confidence as soon as it is certain that there will be an outbreak of war with the United States, and suggest that the President of Mexico shall on his own initiative communicate with Japan suggesting the latter's adherence at once to this plan, and at the same time offer to mediate between Germany and Japan.

Please call to the attention of the President of Mexico that the employment of ruthless submarine warfare now promises to compel England to make peace in a few month [sic]. - Zimmermann.

Original text:

Telegramm No. 1. Ganz geheim. Selbst entziffern. Wir beabsichtigen am 1. Februar uneingeschränkten Ubootkrieg zu beginnen. Es wird Versucht werden, Amerika trotzdem neutral zu halten.

Für den Fall, daß dies nicht gelingen sollte, schlagen wir Mexico mit folgender Grundlage Bündnis vor; Gemeinsame Kriegführung, gemeinsamer Friedensschluß. Reichliche finanzielle Unterstützung und Einverständnis unsererseits, daß Mexiko in Texas, Neu Mexiko, Arizona früher verlorenes Gebiet zurückerobert. Regelung im einzelnen Euer Hochwohlgeboren überlassen.

Euer pp. wollen Vorstehendes Präsidenten streng geheim eröffnen, sobald Kriegsausbruch mit Vereinigten Staaten feststeht und Anregung hinzufügen, Japan von sich aus zu fortigem Beitritt einzuladen und gleichzeitig zwischen uns und Japan zu vermitteln.

Bitte Präsidenten darauf hinweisen, daß rücksichtslose Anwendung unserer U-boote jetzt Aussicht bietet, England in wenigen Monaten zum Frieden zu zwingen. Empfang bestätigen.

Zimmermann.

English and German versions of the decoded Zimmermann Telegram
(signature dropped second n for telegraphic purposes)

Embassy in Mexico; the telegram arrived there on January 19. On February 5 a second set of instructions was sent from Berlin as telegram no. 11 via a different route to the Imperial embassy in Mexico. In it the first set of instructions was modified to say that the discussion of the question of an alliance should begin immediately rather than after the outbreak of war. This telegram also arrived properly at the embassy.

On March 1 the Associated Press put out a report from its Washington correspondent, according to which a copy of the instructions of the Foreign Office to envoy von Eckardt [in Mexico City] was in the possession of the United States government. The instructions had been sent via Count von Bernstorff to Mexico. The president was already in possession of the document when he broke off relations with Germany. The report contains a translation of the text that was purportedly in the hands of the president.

In the version made public the city designation Berlin is added, and for the date, the day the telegram was sent from Washington and arrived in Mexico is given. At the opening the words "No. 1. decipher yourself" and at the end the words "acknowledge receipt" are left out. In the text it reads "general financial support" instead of "generous financial support"; it reads "it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer her lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona" instead of "agreement on our side that Mexico reconquer previously lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona."

In response to an inquiry in the Senate, Secretary of State Lansing said that the government could guarantee that the "Zimmermann letter" was genuine; however, out of concern for the safety of certain persons whose lives could be endangered, it was necessary to keep secret how the letter came into its hands. Further, Snawson [sic] announced in the Senate that the president had authorized him to say that the text as it was

disseminated by the Associated Press was, in substance, correct.



Count von Bernstorff
(German ambassador to the United States)

A Havas [sic] report from Washington on March 2 states that simultaneously with the Mexico note Count von Bernstorff had received an order to take steps to disable German ships in American ports; it would even seem that the ambassador had received very detailed instructions to make the war quite impossible for the United States in case it declared war on Germany.

According to a later report of the Stockholm Telegraph Bureau, the American government is supposed to possess documents according to which the German government, on January 17, directed Count von Bernstorff to take steps to disable machines in ships lying in American ports at the same moment that diplomatic relations would be broken.

News was spread by associates of Sir Francis Oppenheimer, commercial attaché at the British embassy in the Hague, that the Mexican dispatch had gone via Holland; from there one could follow its trail into the hands of the German envoy. After the dispatch had been taken away from the

German messenger or agent, it was an easy task for the American State Department to decipher it with the help of the key placed at its disposal by the British government.

There are several conceivable ways in which the American government could have come to know of the Mexican dispatch. It could:

1. have known the code 0075 that was used for transmission to Washington;

2. have known the code 13040 with which the telegram was further forwarded to Mexico;

3. have received the text itself through treason.

I. The lottery cipher 0075 has been in use since the middle of July 1916 by the missions in Vienna, Sofia, Constantinople (these three with teletypes), Bucharest, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Bern, Lugano, the Hague, and Christiana, as well as at headquarters and the Reich chancellery. The cipher with its secret key was sent to Washington in the cargo submarine Deutschland and reached there on November 3, 1916.

a. The assertion, also appearing in German newspapers, that the American embassy in Berlin was in possession of the cipher secrets is obviously false. Had the ambassador been able to read the text of the telegram, presumably he would not have forwarded it, but instead would have telegraphed the contents to Washington. However, as we know, he has not sent any telegram from Berlin that dealt with the contents of our telegrams. It is just as unlikely that in Washington one could have known the codes at the time the telegrams arrived, otherwise the telegram would not have been delivered to the embassy. We know besides that the Washington government was surprised by the announcement of submarine warfare on January 31. The contents of telegram no. 157, which gives the day for the commencement of submarine warfare, must

therefore have been unknown to it up to that time. Otherwise, the American government would also have taken timely steps to prevent the disabling of our ships.

b. The possibility remains that the American government obtained the code later. In this regard the Stockholm Telegraph Bureau's report indicates that the American government possesses a document according to which the German government directed Count von Bernstorff on January 17 to take steps for the disabling of German ships. Telegram no. 157 dealing with the submarine war actually contains the concluding passage:

Finally, I remind you of preparations for the thorough disabling of German steamers. You are responsible for seeing that the necessary word is passed at the proper moment by secure means so that no German steamer falls into foreign hands in a usable condition.

In the Stockholm report the date is given incorrectly. The ciphered text of telegram no. 157 contains the date January 16. Further, the question is raised whether the American government, if it knew that we made use of its ambassador as an intermediary for the transmission of the Mexican dispatch, wouldn't have exploited this against us in its parliament and with the public. Certainly it would be possible that it kept quiet about this because it wanted to keep from the Entente the fact that it transmitted telegrams for us whose contents it did not know. If the American government knew our code 0075, however, then the Mexican dispatch would have been made public with the date January 16, and not January 19. On the other hand, the report that Count Bernstorff simultaneously received instructions for the disabling of German ships does not offer sufficient support that the American government knows the code.

II. The embassy had the directive to forward to the mission the instructions intended for Mexico by secure means. Perhaps sending an official as a courier to Mexico could have been considered. However, this would have attracted attention. Also, the route of travel was unsafe and slow; e.g., the trip by legation secretary von Schoen had lasted two weeks. Besides, the instructions were marked as "Telegram no. 1." Therefore, there can be no objection that the embassy believed itself obligated to choose telegraphic means. They provided for the communication with Mexico using three codes: no. 5950, no. 13040, and in addition the Navy Communications Book with secret key. As everyone knows, code 5950 was compromised and was left in use for unclassified messages only. In order to make it usable again, at the behest of the Code Bureau of the Foreign Office, the embassy agreed upon a secret keying procedure with all posts in America that possessed this code, i.e., with the consulates in the United States and with the missions in Central and South America. For this arrangement code 13040 had been used. The Code Bureau regards the procedure as good. The mission in Havana, however, had given the embassy its opinion that even in this form code 5950 would not be usable for confidential messages since the keying procedure was too transparent. It is the Navy's wish that the Navy Communications Book should be used for naval purposes only. Moreover, the embassy had received a telegraphic message from East Asia, according to which the Navy code was supposed to be compromised. On the other hand, it was not known to the embassy, either through its own experience or through communications from Berlin or other posts, that code 13040 was to be considered compromised. Therefore, the embassy could envision sufficient security for secure transmission with the use of this code. Certainly it could have increased security by converting the ciphered digits using the Navy secret key whose confidentiality had not been lost by the compromise of the Communications Book. Nevertheless, no rebuke can be directed at the

embassy for the omission of this security measure, since the Foreign Office also used code 13040 without secret key for the encryption of the instructions going to Mexico when it was the intention to send them via cargo submarine to America and to send them from Washington telegraphically to their destination.

At the embassy in Washington there was a directive to convert all ciphered telegrams to Mexico and within the United States to words using the ABC Code and to send them to the telegraph office. This was done for reasons of economy, since otherwise not every group but every digit would count as a word for purposes of payment. However, the conversion also had a certain significance for code security in that it was not immediately apparent that one was dealing with an enciphered telegram. According to telegram no. 13 from Mexico A.S. 1226 the conversion of the telegram of January 19 doesn't seem to have been done. Embassy staffer Kunkel, who personally worked on the encryption, "believes" he remembers that it left Washington in digits plus ABC Code. It arrived in Mexico in digits only. It is improbable that a re-conversion should have taken place at one of the telegraph offices. That could only be done for the purpose of deciphering, and then the perpetrator would certainly have been too careful to expose his attempts in such a clumsy way. It is more probable that Kunkel is mistaken.

Code 13040 had been in use since 1912 in Washington and New York, Havana, Port au Prince, and La Paz, and since 1907-1909 in the other missions in South and Central America. In the case of a lot of enciphered material the meaning of a more or less large part of the code can be deduced. It is, however, improbable that the American government should have succeeded in deciphering the telegram on the basis of code materials known to it or provided to it by the English secret service. Also speaking against such an assumption is the fact that the text made public by the American government is without gaps,

especially that the names Arizona (four groups) and Texas (two groups) are reconstituted in it.

The American government could, however, have come into possession of the code itself or obtained a copy or photo of it. This could have happened at any place where the code is found. A misappropriation of the code has not been reported by any of these places. The consulate in Guyamas in Mexico, where a break-in is supposed to have occurred, did not possess the code. In Washington and New York all codes were burned under supervision after diplomatic relations were broken. Indications of forcible entry into the workspaces or forcible attempts to open the code cabinet have never been noted either at the embassy or at the general consulate. Nevertheless, safeguarding of the codes in Washington was not especially secure; they were located in an older cabinet that was locked only with a combination lock that was already somewhat worn out. The combination had not been changed since 1902. When a combination lock is well worn, even a nonspecialist, if he's lucky, can correctly dial the combination by feel. It also wouldn't have been difficult in the summer, when the embassy was in the countryside and only very few personnel remained behind in Washington, to slip into the chancery spaces, remove code 13040 from the code cabinet, photograph it, and put it back again. Code 13040 was located in Washington during the summer in 1915 and 1916.

In addition, one must consider that one of the officials could have betrayed the code. At the embassy 12 mid-level officials had access to the codes in addition to court councilor Sachse's son, who worked as an assistant clerk for a year and a half until the fall of 1916. Should one of these people have betrayed the code, it would be striking that this code, and not also the lottery codes, especially code 0075, was chosen. However, as elaborated above, it should not be assumed that the American government possesses code 0075; also, there is no basis for believing that the other codes, in which many telegrams and mail codes of

great interest to the American government were sent, are known to the American government.

At the general consulate in New York, where the codes were safeguarded under triple lock, the circle of persons who had access to the codes was smaller. Besides the consulate administrator, this consisted of the three vice consuls and consulate secretary Bern. Consulate secretary Georges, who was originally supposed to return to Germany, then however remained behind without authorization, was never involved in code work. It can be considered out of the question that he should have come into possession of code 13040.

Finally, it is definitely improbable that the American government possesses code 13040, for then the text of the Mexico dispatch would certainly have been made public with the serial number and notations "decipher yourself" and "acknowledge receipt," as well as with the serial number of the Washington embassy and the signature of Count Bernstorff, because in so doing its genuineness would have been made even more believable from the very beginning. Further, it should be borne in mind that code 13040 has been used for many secret messages, among them for an exchange of telegrams between Mexico and New York regarding the delivery of equipment for the wireless receiving station in Mexico. It can be assumed that if the American government knew of these telegrams, they would have now made them public.

III. It is more probable that the text of the Mexico dispatch was betrayed.

a. The Imperial envoy in Mexico considers it out of the question that the dispatch should have become known through treason or indiscretion in Mexico. Speaking against this possibility is especially the fact that telegram no. 11 to Mexico, which directs the immediate implementation of the instructions in the event of war given in telegram no. 1 and accordingly was of particularly great interest to our opponents, has not

become known. Both telegrams were deciphered by a legation secretary and were not read by chancery officials. The original ciphered texts were burned immediately by the legation secretary and the ashes were scattered. Until they were ordered burned, the deciphered versions of both telegrams were secured in a new steel safe in legation secretary Magnus's bedroom which is located in the chancery building.

b. In Washington, six or seven officials had worked on the deciphering of telegram nos. 157 and 158. Afterward, the embassy councilor had directed that talking about them, even within the chancery, would not be permitted. However, all mid-level officials with perhaps the exception of court councilor Sachse, who was sick, and embassy staffer Kühn, knew of the Mexico dispatch; one of them read through the deciphered document once again a week later. The deciphered document – a carbon copy doesn't seem to have been made – was filed unsealed in the same file as, and in fact directly behind, the telegram no. 157 that contained the concluding passage about the disabling of German ships. The filing cabinet in which this file was secured was accessible to all middle-level officials of the embassy, i.e., 12 persons. The deciphered version of the Mexico dispatch was destroyed in the first few days of February, apparently on February 1. In the time from January 19 to February 1 it can be established that each of these officials, with the exception of court councilor Sachse, Dr. Edler, and Seibert, were alone and unobserved in the chancery for a long period of time. At any rate, this was the case during midday duty, perhaps evening duty as well. Each of them could therefore have copied the dispatch. The perpetrator would then have either sold the copy or a translation to a foreign agent or, without negative intentions, have given it to an acquaintance who for his own part betrayed it. The dispatch is also so short that someone with a good memory can certainly remember the text after one reading. The perpetrator could have communicated the final section of telegram no. 157 at the same time. In so doing he would have erroneously given the date as January 17. This date was of no special interest, while the date of the Mexico dispatch was

significant in order to be able to verify the message through comparison with the enciphered telegram that had been sent.

The American side asserts that the government already possessed the text at the time that diplomatic relations were broken. It is not very likely that it should have quietly held onto it for so long. One would sooner be inclined to believe that the State Department would have made it public immediately after receiving it. Then one would come to the view that one of the officials who remained behind in America is the perpetrator, or that if the perpetrator was among the departing officials, he would have left negotiations with the American or English agent to an accomplice, with instructions to sell the dispatch only after a certain amount of time had elapsed. It would certainly also be possible that the treason took place earlier and to deflect suspicion, a delay in making the document public was a condition of the betrayal. Of course the State Department would have violated this agreement when it let it be known that it was already in possession of the dispatch at the time that diplomatic relations were broken. Supporting the idea that treason is involved is Lansing's declaration in the Senate that he could not make more detailed statements about the acquisition of the dispatch without endangering the lives of certain persons. That doesn't have to mean someone who is in Germany or on the way there. It is just as likely that Lansing had in mind that German retaliation could also strike the perpetrator in America.

It should be clearly emphasized that for all officials on whom suspicion could fall from this point on, the best evidence is given by their superiors as well as that officials who have been interviewed declare it to be out of the question that one of their colleagues could have committed such an act.

/signature/

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(U//FOUO) [redacted] is a member of the Naval Reserve Security Group Devens, Massachusetts, where he serves as the assistant officer-in-charge of the unit's [redacted] detachment. [redacted] has been a member of the Naval Reserve for eleven years and spends two weeks each summer working at NSA. His most recent assignment was to the Center for Cryptologic History. Prior to joining the Naval Reserve, he spent eight years on active duty, most of it with the Naval Security Group. As an enlisted man and officer, LCDR [redacted] served on board the USS *Mississippi*, performed temporary duty assignments on board the submarines USS *L. Mendel Rivers* and USS *Sea Devil*, and served as the cryptologic officer on board the USS *Enterprise*.

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